

Modeling the Great Game in Asia Part One: The Viceroy's Study Group and Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Great Game provided an analytical framework that organized successful efforts by imperial Britain to build a stable and secure Asian rimland long before automated machines allowed the rapid accumulation and processing of information. The Great Game framework provided structured forms of argumentation for the production of intelligence that resulted in improved monitoring and analytical capability. However, these insights do not translate readily into current analytical frameworks and cannot work with automated reasoning tools. The authors combine historical knowledge with UML, model-based transformations, and computational analysis to configure the Great Game framework to a more formal and modern assessment. This first part focuses on the Viceroy's Study Group and their assessment of Afghanistan, with a model to illustrate the British approach to Indian stability.

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The Great Game: A Resilient Framework for Analysis

The “Great Game” describes the international struggle to build a stable and secure Asian rimland from the Persian Gulf on the west to Indochina on the east. In the past, victory in the Great Game secured a barrier between global economies and networks of communication and defense linked by the sea, on the one hand, and power based in the Asian heartland on the other. Today, victory in the Great Game denies the Asian rimland as a base area for forces bent to destroy the modern world system. The future will hold additional permutations as the actors and goals change with time. In each case, victory depends on the security and stability of the Indian subcontinent as the geospatial center of the Asian rimland. The rules of the Great Game are defined by the relative constancy of geography versus less permanent and less predictable factors such as ideology. This paper describes an effort to configure this model of the Great Game in UML for use by modern analytical and computational tools.

For the historical conception of the Great Game and its rules, the authors used the work of the Viceroy's Study Group (VSG). Sir Olaf Caroe organized the VSG in 1942 in his capacity as Foreign Secretary in Britain's Government of India. The VSG operated in British India until 1945. Their function was to review British planning for the end of the World War II and India's independence in the postwar era. The notion of a continuous Great Game that preceded and would survive the withdrawal of British rule in India transfixed the VSG's analytical work. As a whole, the product of the VSG represents a canonical summation of British imperial concepts and learning relating to the Great Game.¹

Intelligence production in the British Empire, as represented by the VSG, compares quite favorably to that of the present day in its relative comprehension of regional systems such as the Asian rimland. The reason for this success? The VSG had sophisticated methods for analysis based on common models. Intelligence production emphasized anonymous work products while stressing accurate information. The VSG encouraged the evaluation of information from multiple vantage points within their models, but demanded the presentation of analysis in falsifiable terms. Overall the VSG employed a remarkably efficient system of information processing, especially given the IT limitations of the era. In their use of a common analytical framework, the VSG typified intelligence production in the British Empire. Historians refer to the broader phenomenon as the “official mind.” The official mind was not like a machine going through sets of rules or algorithms. The official mind more closely resembled an organism monitoring, assessing, and adapting to actual events, trends, and patterns. It neither squelched debate nor led to group-think nor provided a collective will. What it did provide was the context used to mediate debate among distributed British officials managing a far-flung empire. These officials engaged in lively give-and-take about any number of policies and their implications as shown by the documentary record in British archives. In the case of the VSG specifically, one can reconstruct accurate assessments about flashpoints such as Afghanistan that have ignited along the Asian rimland since India's independence and partition in 1947.

Although much of the analysis from the VSG or other debate in the “official mind” appears quite acute in hindsight, its work did not always form the basis of policy in its own time. But the importance of the VSG does not derive from their influence, or lack of it, on policy. The importance of the VSG derives from the acuity, complexity and sophistication of their argumentation.

Insights from the VSG

The VSG worked from the premise that the security of the Asian rimland from the Persian Gulf to Indochina “*is one complete strategical problem.*” The security of the Gulf was bound up with the security of the Indian subcontinent which in turn depended on Burma and Indochina. A stable if not united subcontinent formed the fulcrum in the system. Its fragmentation would leave the wings isolated and the balance broken. This view contrasted with a geospatial perspective both natural and understandable for Americans that located the Gulf on the eastern edge of a European-centered system and Burma and Indochina on the western edge of a Pacific-centered system. But by viewing the region from an Indian center, as the VSG did, events along the Asian rimland since 1945 seem unsurprising, the products of a predictable, albeit complex and dynamic, structure.

To give a concrete example, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was, as Olaf Caroe, the VSG's director put it, the predictable (and predicted) “after-effect” of India's partition in 1947. By creating two mutually antagonistic successor states in India and Pakistan, the partition effectively turned the subcontinent's power potential in on itself. For nearly a century beforehand, power based on a stable subcontinent had provided the indispensable counterpoise to Russia that had allowed the emergence of a viable Afghan state. The fragmentation of the counterpoise on the subcontinent allowed Soviet decision-makers to calculate their interests and options in 1979

very differently than their Russian predecessors had in comparable crises in 1885, 1895, and 1925. It is worth emphasizing that the subcontinent’s stability formed a counterpoise in diplomatic and economic terms as well as military ones. The continued hostility of India and Pakistan in the 1990s thus weighed heavily against the reconstruction of security and stability in Afghanistan. The fact that different elements in the Afghan polity pulled variously toward Pakistan, Iran, and former Soviet states in Central Asia was not so much symptomatic of strength on the part of those countries as it was of the subcontinent’s weakness as a center of gravity. Afghanistan consequently reemerged as the kind of base area and seedbed it had once formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for forces of regional instability and terrorism.

Figure one and two review key entities before and after partition for a scenario based on Afghanistan. The <<stereotypes>> in the model to define locations, agents, values, and other entities have their definition in the Great Game profile described in the next section. Figure one shows the main agents in that have goals leading them to focus on Afghanistan. Note that none of the players, or <<agents>>, hold goals or values that lead them to promote a version of social control in Afghanistan. In contrast, as shown in Figure two, the Great Game following partition inserts new agents into the game, most importantly Pakistan, split into the unwieldy federation bifurcated by another new agent, India. The United States also appeared on the scene as a great power, but they lacked the focus on the goal of maintaining Indian stability that had animated the British in India. Pakistan and India had territorial goals that forced competition between them, especially in terms of which princely states the Imperial successors would control, with the Kashmir region still a thorn. Post independence, the Great Game now had actors concerned with the type of social organization in the region, with Pakistan organized as an entity protecting Islamic values of some undetermined form in a social polity. The differences between these two models illustrate Caroe’s emphasis on systemic instability that left the Soviet Union room for maneuver to bring troops in the region.

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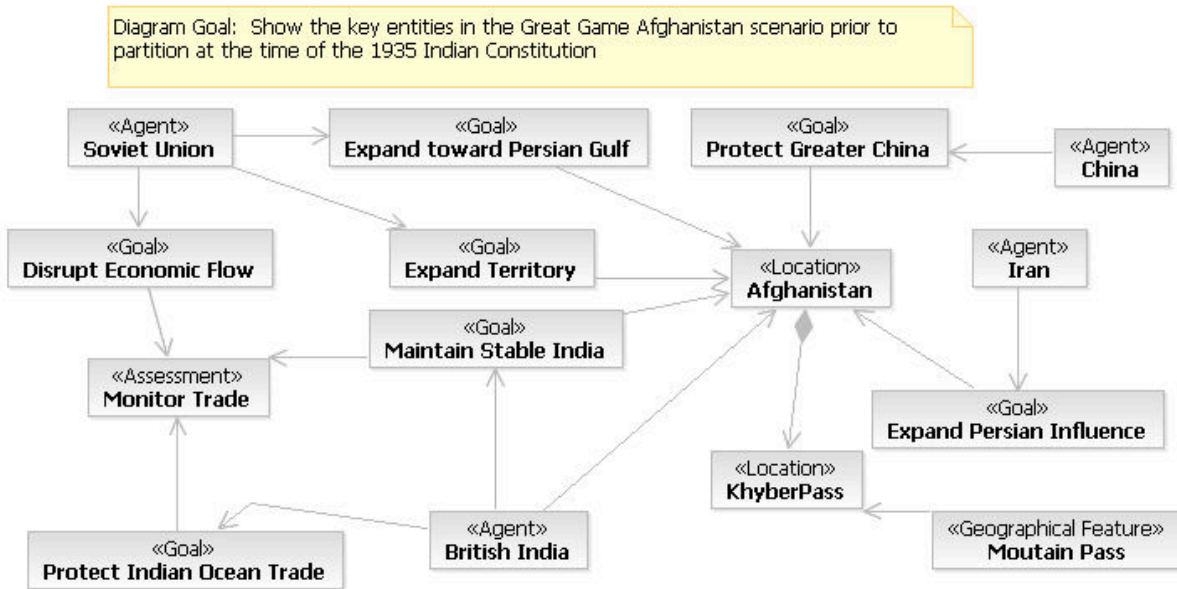


Figure 1: Great Game Afghanistan c. 1935

These diagrams do not suggest a historical determinism, but are snapshots from a broader analytical framework. For its own part, the VSG explicitly worked to take account of new and emerging factors in its analysis of the Great Game. For instance, the VSG assessment of Afghanistan (as in other country studies the VSG conducted) imbedded a presumption that air power would likely be the dominant mode of strategic projection and organization in the postwar era. The result generated opposing estimations of Afghanistan’s future importance. In the first estimate air power dramatically discounted the importance of Afghanistan to the security of India and by extension to the stability of the Asian rimland. Air power presumably obviated the utility of buffer states, of which Afghanistan was the archetype (the term was actually coined by Sir Alfred Lyall, a British Indian official in the 1870s and 1880s, to describe Afghanistan’s position between Russia in Central Asia and Britain in India). In the second estimate, air power actually increased the value of buffer states, and specifically of Afghanistan. Air power may have increased

the strategic reach and speed of attack of its possessors, but it was limited by distance and range. By effectively adding space to the subcontinent, the buffer formed by Afghanistan would buy time—time to detect and intercept the inbound units of an airborne attacker. A similar importance arguably attached to Afghanistan when viewed from the vantage of a power based Central Asia. Either way, air power actually portended an intensification of international competition for influence in and over Afghanistan. Today the question is not whether air power obviates the Afghan buffer but whether air power obviates the Indian center. To what extent does modern airlift make the reconstruction of a viable Afghan state possible irrespective of the situation on the subcontinent? To what degree of effectiveness does a Central Asian base area for the supply and support of Afghanistan substitute for an Indian center? These considerations can all be folded into the model as values on attributes in the model, providing a framework for debate and analysis using software.

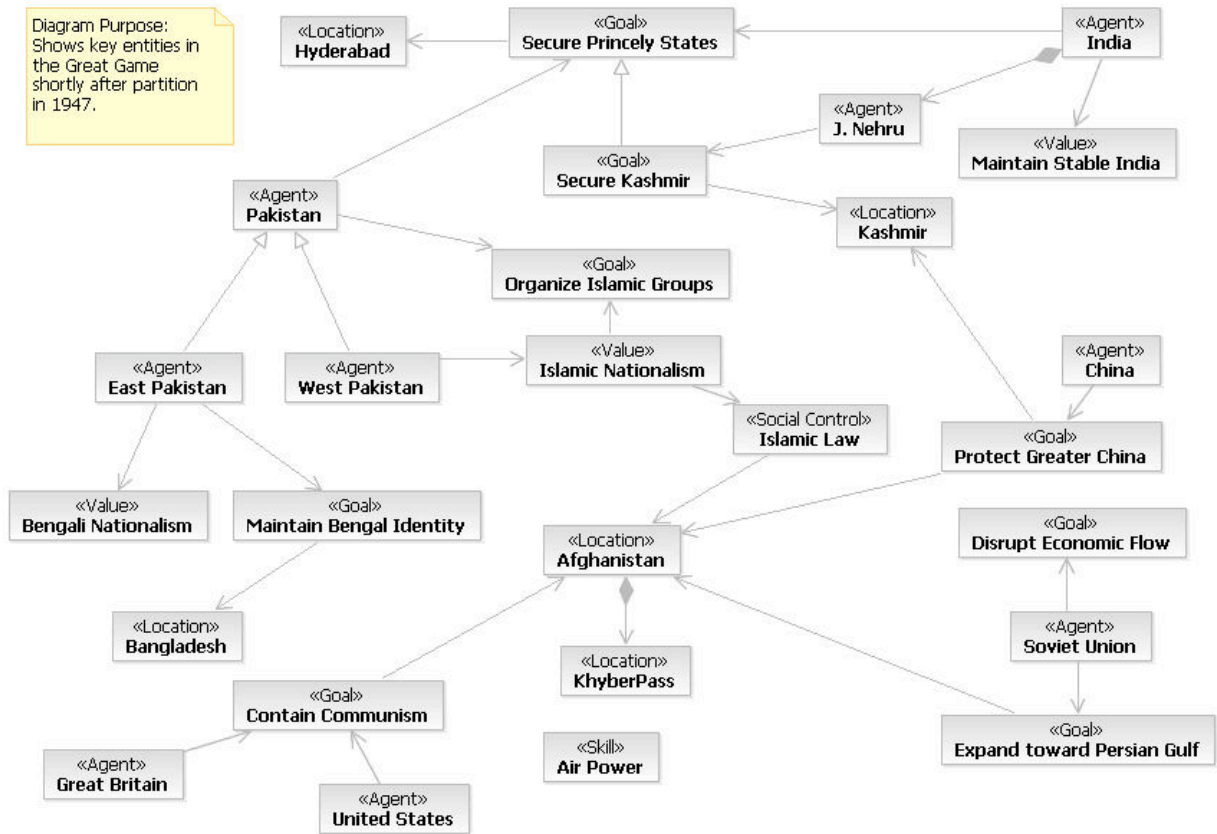


Figure 2: Great Game Post Partition c. 1950

Indeed, the VSG was ultimately concerned to avoid the pitfall of planning, or in their case studying, to fight the last war. Their interest in Afghanistan reflected their presumption of a continuation in the late twentieth century of traditional Russian/Soviet expansionism in Asia, which came to pass. Today’s interest in the country derives from the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism as an organizing principle hostile to cosmopolitan values with territorial ambitions. The potential trouble lies in the distraction from the eastern wing of the rimland system. The VSG argued that the Russian threat on India’s west so consumed British strategy that too little thought was given to the east. When the long-expected great power attack on India’s frontiers actually materialized in World War II, it came not from Russia through Afghanistan but from Japan through Burma. In the context of the Cold War, the VSG’s erstwhile director argued that intelligence assessment must not find itself choosing between “leaving the Himalayas open to China and the Indian Ocean to Russian fleets.” Applied to the current scene, the insight is surely that the Islamist threat in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere not come to so define the morphology of future enemies that we are left surprised by say state-against-state competition igniting flashpoints in the eastern rimland. The Great Game framework avoids the pitfall while keeping a focus on the priorities at hand.

The computational rigor to model the Great Game requires more than a couple of illustrative diagrams. The analytical framework requires much more detail to export the ideas into computational tools. Part two of this paper reviews the underlying profile that is the core of the model and suggests paths to migrate the insights for computational analysis.

References

¹ The material on the Great Game is from Peter John Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the Defense of Asia*(Akron: The University of Akron Press, 2005)